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THE PRIESTLY ELEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, AS SEEN IN THE LAWS.

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IF we ask ourselves what enters into and constitutes religion, the answer will be: Three distinct elements, namely, conduct, belief, and worship. The priest in history has had to do mainly with worship. The word "worship" is used to express the attitude of the individual, or of a group of individuals, toward the outside, higher world of supernatural or divine existence. It is worth our while to note the fact that, in the most ancient religions, of the three elements just named only that of worship existed. There was no dogma, and there was no relationship between conduct and worship. It is with the element of worship, or, as it may otherwise be called, the priestly element, that we have to do at this moment.

The priestly element in the Old Testament distinguishes itself very sharply from two other elements, the prophetic and that of the sage or philosopher, technically called wisdom. The prophetic element exhibits itself in the prophetic histories of the Pentateuch, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, as well as in the prophetic books which bear the names of the great prophets. It is this element which, perhaps, stands out most distinctly in our minds. The wisdom element includes those portions of the Old Testament literature, and that division of the Old Testament thought, which stand related to three great subjects; namely, the laws of the world—cosmogony; the laws of life—that is, the duties of man in the various relationships of life; and the problems of life. It will be noted at once that it is especially such books as Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes that contain this important element. But now, entirely distinct from both of these elements, and forming a third, which, through the entire history of Old

Testament times, is constantly exhibiting itself, there appears the element which is termed *priestly*; that is, that portion of the Old Testament which has most closely to do with worship. If we undertake to separate from the prophetic matter and the wisdom, or philosophical, matter that which pertains most largely to worship, we shall find more than perhaps at first would have been expected. Here belong, first of all, the laws or legal material, since the formulated law-codes of Israel dealt most largely with those matters which related to worship. Besides this, however, we find that men who were priests, and who were therefore filled with the priestly spirit, wrote histories of the Israelitish nation in which they sought to represent, as best they could, the priestly side of Israelitish life, and that which was concerned with worship. Such histories are found in the books of Chronicles and in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. But further, it is with this phase of Hebrew life and thought that the Psalms ought to be connected, and in the Hebrew Psalms we have, of course, the very cream of the Old Testament thought. What are these songs except the expression of the soul's deepest thought while in communion with the higher power—in other words, the most delicate and true expressions of the soul engaged in worship?

It is proposed in three successive papers very briefly to classify and describe these three phases of the priestly activity as it is found in the Old Testament.

The question to be considered in this paper is the priestly element, as it is seen in the law-codes of the Israelitish nation.

First of all, we may inquire: How are the laws of Israel to be classified? The answer to this question is a simple one. There may first be set off by itself the Decalogue, appearing as it does in somewhat different form in Exod., chap. 20, and Deut., chap. 5. This table of laws is understood to be an epitome, in the briefest possible form, of the great principles underlying Israelitish teaching. Its relation to Israelitish history and to the other codes is a question which we need not here consider. We may note what is ordinarily called the Book of the Covenant, Exod., chaps. 21–23. We find here a group of eighty or ninety injunctions

expressed in very sententious form and arranged, strangely enough, like the Decalogue itself, in groups of five or ten. The subject-matter of these groups of laws includes enactments on the rights of slaves, slave concubines, cases of violence and injuries, injury in connection with property, theft, breaches of trust, dealings with the weak and poor, offerings, testimony, justice, festivals and feasts, and sacrifices. This group of laws seems to be complete in itself and separated from all other groups. We find next a body of laws which forms the substance of the book of Deuteronomy, 12:1 to 26:19. Still another group, the largest of all, is to be found in Exod., chaps. 25-40, in Leviticus, and, in connection with historical statements, in Numbers, especially chaps. 5, 6, 15, 18, 19, 28-30, 35, and 36.

The first question which one naturally asks relates to the contents of these various groups. Does one group deal with a certain list of subjects, a second group with still another list, and so on? Or are the same subjects treated in all of the groups? Even a cursory examination of the list will show that in the great majority of instances something will be found concerning the most important subjects in each of the so-called groups or codes. For example, if one wishes to know what the Pentateuch has to say concerning clean and unclean food, he will find one statement on the subject in Deut. 14:3-20 and a somewhat similar statement, with only slight modifications, in Lev. 11:1-23. If he wishes to know what is said about the rules of service and the observance of the sabbatical year, he will find statements in Exod. 21:2-26 and 23:9-11; in Deut. 15:1-6 and 12:18; and in Lev. 25:1-7 and 26:43. If he wishes to know the commands of the Pentateuch in reference to the observance of feasts, he will find them given in Exod. 23:14-17 and 34:18-20; Deut. 16:1-17; Lev., chap. 23; Numb., chaps. 28 and 29. And as indicated above, even the Decalogue is given twice, one form differing in several important respects from the other.

A brief statement may be made, in passing, of the two widely different theories as to the historical relationship sustained by these various groups each to the other. These theories have been suggested in answer to the question: Why, in a law-book, so

small at the best, should there be so many repetitions of the same thought? and also, Why, if the laws were to be repeated, should the different forms exhibit such important modifications? According to the view more commonly entertained until the last quarter of this century, the Book of the Covenant, referred to above and found in Exod., chaps. 21-23, was understood to be a kind of constitution, its form and contents characterizing it as the basis of all other legislative material. The collection of laws found in Deuteronomy, and called the Deuteronomic Code, was a body of laws based upon the constitution, and drawn out in great detail for the use of the people. The introduction to these laws in Deut., chaps. 1-11, was evidently hortatory, and, through this introduction, the laws were placed in the hands of the people at large for their guidance and direction. On the other hand, the collection found in the last fifteen chapters of Exodus, in Leviticus, and in Numbers, the largest group, was another codification of the same laws, based upon the same constitution, but much more technical in its character, and intended primarily for the specific use of the priestly order which conducted the administration of these laws. In brief, then, according to the older view, the Book of the Covenant is the constitution, the Deuteronomic Code is the popular law-book, while the Levitical is the technical law-book for the priests. All of these had their origin before Israel had taken possession of the land of Canaan.

According to the more modern theory, and one which has gained ground very rapidly during the past decade, quite another explanation of the relationship of these groups is the true one. These great law-books came into existence successively, and during a period covering at least six or eight centuries. The Book of the Covenant was Israel's earliest law-book, and Israel's religious and civil life were in accordance with this during a large portion of the history of the nation—that is, from the beginning to perhaps 625 years before Christ. According to this theory no other law-book was known to Samuel, Saul, David, Solomon, and to the kings down to the time of Josiah. The book of Deuteronomy came into use as an authoritative law-book in the year 621 B. C., at which time it was found in the

temple and promulgated by the authority of the king.¹ This book includes all of the first law-book in a somewhat different form or codification, and, in addition, it includes the forms of worship and legal enactments which had grown up about the first during the six centuries. It is assigned to Moses because it has grown directly out of and is based upon the work of Moses. Those immediately interested in this codification were the prophets and priests, who had come to see that more stringent laws in reference to worship were necessary if the people were to be brought to a realization and an experience of the great doctrine of one God. The great ideas of this book, which distinguish it from the older law-book, are the enactments scattered here and there throughout the book which make it legal for worship to be offered Jehovah only in one place, Jerusalem, and the laws which make the Levitical tribe a tribe set aside for the sacred office of the priesthood. But now, after the exile, when the second temple has been built, Ezra, and others associated with him, the nation having come to a realization of the real meaning of one God, inaugurates a system of laws much fuller and more complicated than any which had yet been in operation. These laws, based on the fundamental idea of God's holiness, and embodying more perfectly than any other system has ever embodied the idea of man's sinfulness, are the laws which regulate Israel's life after the middle of the fifth century B. C. This second theory may be denominated the historical theory, because it assumes that the Israelitish laws took on different forms adapted to the different historical environments in which Israel found herself during the centuries.

It remains now, in the space at our disposal, to ask ourselves two or three questions and to frame for these questions the briefest possible answers: (1) What is the essential difference between these two theories of Israelitish worship? (2) What are the chief characteristics of this priestly system, or, as it may otherwise be termed, the Israelitish system of worship? (3) What was the great purpose of this system?

1. According to one theory, this system, in all its details, was

¹ 2 Kings, chap. 22.

presented to the nation Israel objectively. Those who hold this theory recognize that Israel did not accept the system at once, and that it was not until the time of Ezra, many centuries after Moses, that the system at last found general acceptance among the people. According to the other theory, this system came as truly from God, but subjectively, through the nation. During the whole period of national history before the building of the temple, a simple form of worship prevailed. There was no complicated ritual and no distinct caste of the priesthood. As God continued to reveal himself through the centuries, and as the thought of God among the people was lifted higher and higher, new elements enter the system of worship which embody these new ideas of God, and at last there comes the complete Levitical system. According to the first theory, the system was given to Israel from without; according to the second, it was given from within, through Israel; according to the first, it was given within one generation; according to the second, it was the result of divine work in connection with the nation, reaching through several centuries. Is there less of the divine element in this system according to the second theory? No. The substance of the different opinions is simply a question as to the method of God's working. The results are absolutely the same. The system in its most complete form is the same whether one theory of its origin or another is adopted.

2. What are its chief characteristics? In answer to this question the following points may be suggested:

a) Its spirit is the same as that of other priestly systems, for it was an expression of the religious spirit, and its supreme effort was to get into close relationship with the higher power.

b) In its general form this system has much in common with the systems of other nations; for example, altar and temple, sacrifice and feasts, music and prayer, priest and holy order. Some of those things which seem especially peculiar are found in other systems; for example, the Urim and Thummim, the sacrifice of meal and salt, the clean and unclean.

c) The system of worship was at all times in danger of becoming formal. The people were more greatly influenced

by the priests than by the prophets, and the prophets were very frequently found in conflict with the nation and with the priestly system. This was because the priest represented old ideas, the prophet, new; the priest represented form, the prophet, spirit.

d) It is evident from the history that the acceptance of the priestly system by the people did not come until very late in Israel's history, the times of Ezra; and by this time, it will be remembered, prophecy had died. It is an interesting fact that many of the later prophets were priests; for example, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. It would seem, therefore, that prophecy, in dying, bequeathed its mission as a legacy to the priests, and that the priests did not hesitate to accept the legacy and to carry on the work.

e) Whatever may be said of the date of the great law-books, Israel's system of worship seems to be full of contradictions. In the early times it is permitted to man to worship anywhere; after the days of Josiah worship is centralized and one may worship only at Jerusalem. In the days of the exile there is no temple, and one is unable to worship (in the old sense) anywhere, for Jerusalem is destroyed and Babylon is unclean. After the exile, worship is again centralized in the second temple, and later it is redistributed throughout the world in the synagogues. A more interesting variety could hardly be imagined, each form being adjusted to the special historical period in which it was observed.

f) And, strangely enough, at the time when it was narrowest and most sacrificial it was broadest and most spiritual. When animals were being slain by tens of thousands, and when the body was being worn out by washings and purifications, at this same time this religion was furnishing the greatest examples of highest spiritual contemplation and communion with God which have ever been given to man, that is, the Psalms. How exceedingly varied, complex, and compound this priestly element was!

3. As to the purpose of this system, the following points deserve consideration:

a) Was this system definitely intended to prefigure the

death of Jesus Christ? No, and yes. No, if in an arbitrary manner one seeks to connect each detail with the situation of the Crucified One. Yes, if with broad vision one sees in all of it an education of the mind of the individual, of the nation, and of the world for a proper understanding of the great sacrificial act of Jesus Christ.

b) Every act of worship had a meaning for him who first acted it; in the oil and salt, in the blood and fat, in the meal and incense, there were ideas which expressed the feelings of men's hearts. The temple was a great laboratory in which learners were required to go through the entire process.

c) The result of this was to impress upon the individual certain great and fundamental truths. Did he wish to know why it was that he touched no unclean thing, why it was that he observed the sabbath? The answer in each case was a truth. To be sure, many performed the act without asking the question.

d) The purpose was to keep the people in close touch with God. But God was holy, and the people who touched God must themselves be holy.

e) This system taught that the suffering and death of the animal was a substitution for the death of the man, the suffering of one for another—the greatest thought in the history of the world.

f) The system was intended to make the people worthy of the coming Messiah, whose failure to come in accordance with the words of the prophets aroused the skepticism of some, and excited others to greater zeal—a condition which was at the same time the daughter of the Messianic hope and the mother of two children; one, the religious spirit seen in the Psalms, the other the religious spirit seen in the attitude of mind of the scribes and Pharisees. These two children were greatly different, as children in a family will differ.

g) The system was needed to encase the true doctrine, and protect it in certain crises through which it was to pass. The greatest struggle of the Old Testament religion was the struggle against Hellenism, or Greek influence. Greece destroyed other eastern nationalities, but the Hebrew people maintained

their independence, at the same time absorbing much that was good in Hellenism. How was it possible for the Hebrew religion to withstand this tremendous influence? It was because of the system which had been given it and in which, as within an impenetrable armor, the truth was able to resist every attack.

h) The great thought of the priestly system was that of sin, but a still greater thought was that of sin's forgiveness. It is, from beginning to end, concerned with communion of soul with God. It began with nothing which other nations did not have. It closed by providing the entire world with that of which the world otherwise would have been deprived forever—its models for expressing the heart's inward thoughts with heaven. Its culmination was Jesus Christ.